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Robert Browning's "Meeting at Night": A Stylistics Perspective

Abstract: Stylistics, a major branch of linguistics, is primarily concerned with the application of the methodology of linguistics to the study of the style used in language in a particular context. As the name suggests, Stylistics is the study of style or language of literary texts. It concerns itself more or less exclusively with the language of literary texts and through a systematic examination of the language, it arrives at an interpretation of those texts. It does so by applying the insights and methods of linguistics to analyse the language of literary texts and to offer interpretations of those texts on the basis of that analysis. We can therefore say that stylistics is the application of linguistics to the analysis and interpretation of literary texts.

This paper is an attempt to present a stylistic analysis of one of the celebrated poet of English literature, namely Robert Browning. The researcher's attempt here is to approach Browning's poem "Meeting at Night" from the stylistic point of view keeping in view the foregrounding devices used in stylistic study. In this regard the tools of stylistics which can also be considered as the various constitutive elements of the poem such as title, mode of narration, phonological patterning, syntax, lexis and overall structure of the said poem are taken into consideration to make the meaning explicit.

Key words: foregrounding, lexis, mode of narration, phonology, stylistics, syntax, title

1. Introduction

Stylistics is basically a method of textual interpretation based on a systematic analysis of the different linguistic features of the text. This text can be any genre of literature i.e. poetry, fiction, drama etc. In all these literary types, the patterns of the language, its grammatical structures, the large vocabulary, different types of discourses and numerous contexts in which these discourse take place make it a very daunting task for stylistic study. However stylistics takes a close look at the text and analyses its significant language forms for the sake of interpretation. In this regard it attempts to make an analysis of a literary text through certain tools such as sounds (alliteration, combination of sounds), lexis (words, word structure and interrelation), semantics (meaning relationships), discourse (structure of linguistic interaction), context (situational constraints) and syntax (sentence structure) (Partha Sarathi Misra,14).

The proposed paper is an earnest attempt to make a stylistic analysis of Robert Browning's poem "Meeting at Night" through the study of its constitutive elements like title, mode of address, phonological patterning, syntax, lexis and overall structure. At the same time the researcher is very much particular about the concept of foregrounding in the poem. Indeed, any piece of literary work becomes a valid stylistic study if it contains foregrounding elements. By definition, foregrounding is a technique for emphasizing or highlighting something. It is a technique which is effectively employed in the language of literature. In short it is an attention-calling device. In literary language, it is systematically and purposefully employed to achieve thematic effects (Peter Verdonk, 2005). There are various means or devices through which the technique of foregrounding operates. These are deviation, repetition and parallelism.

Regarding Robert Browning it can be mentioned that he is, along with Alfred Lord Tennyson, the most famous and widely studied poet of the Victorian period. His poems are known for their irony, characterisation, dark humour, social commentary, historical settings, and challenging vocabulary and syntax. In the annals of English literary history, his reputation as a major poet was firmly established, based on what are still recognized as his four most important volumes of verse, 'Dramatic Lyrics'(1842), 'Dramatic Romances and Lyrics'(1845), 'Men and Women'(1855) and 'Dramatis Personae'(1864). The selected poem "Meeting at night" for this proposed study is a Victorian English love poem that appeared in 'Dramatic Romances and Lyrics' in which "Night" and "Morning" were two sections. In 1849 the poet separated them into two poems "Meeting at Night" and "Parting at Morning". The present research study is aimed at making a stylistic analysis of the poem "Meeting at Night" taking into account all the constitutive elements of the poem like title, mode of narration, phonological patterning, syntax, lexis and overall structure. Various kinds of foregrounding devices like deviation, repetition, parallelism etc. are also kept in view in this stylistic study of the poem.

Regarding the previous works on the poem we can say that the selected poem under study have been studied and analysed by several scholars. Plenty of works like research article, journals, books etc. are written on the poetry of Robert Browning. Here I would like to mention Ahmad Nur Faiz (2015) whose research thesis on 'Language style of the "I" characters in "Meet at Night" by Robert Browning and "How do I love thee?" by Elizabeth Barrett Browning' specifically highlights the figures of speech that are employed in the poems. Another scholar Iram Akram(2015) in 'Stylistic Analysis of Meeting at Night' also only specifies the various constitutive elements of poetry. His article dwells on the linguistics features of the poem.

Despite of all these studies, the present paper is unique in various ways. Besides giving a detailed account of various linguistic features of a poem, this paper provides a stylistic analysis of the chosen poem taking into consideration the concept of foregrounding, deviation, parallelism etc. In this way the research paper is expected to account objectively the meaning for the text in its totality and also enhance the aesthetic qualities of the poem.

2. Methodology

This research study is primarily analytical in nature with the application of Stylistics. The Stylistics features are analysed and interpreted in the text with the help of close reading. Both primary and secondary data are used in the preparation of this study. Secondary data are used in the form of reference books, journals, articles, research volumes, internet etc. As primary source I followed rigorously the selected poem of Robert Browning.

3. Interpretation

The present study is a humble endeavour to analyse and interpret one popular poem of Victorian literature namely 'Meeting at Night' composed by Robert Browning. The aim of this paper is to arrive at an analysis of this poem through an examination of its constitutive elements- title, mode of narration, phonological patterning, syntax, lexis and overall structure (Geoffrey Leech, 69).

3.1 Title

The poem 'Meeting at Night' is a Victorian English love poem by Robert Browning. The original poem appeared in *Dramatis Romances and Lyrics* in which 'Night' and first we begin with title which always bears an important significance in the interpretation of a poem. The title 'Meeting at Night' is very much apt and suggestive as the poem is about the sailor's

arduous journey to meet his beloved at night. It is a secretive meeting and the first stanza and the first four lines picturesquely present the various stages of his journey through land and sea. The actual meeting does take place but only at the end of the last two lines of the poem.

3.2 Mode of Address or Narration

The discourse in 'Meeting at Night' is in the first person point of view which ensures greater intimacy with the reader and also a higher degree of authenticity of felt experience. The use of this first person narration characterizes the lyric form which belongs to the genre of what is called subjective poetry. Again in many ways, the poem sounds like a monologue which is one of Browning's forte in the art of poetic composition. The first person narrative also provides a live experience of a sailor on a fiery night with a sensible and picturesque presentation of its surroundings.

3.3 Phonological Patterning or stylistic study at the phonological level

Phonology is another rewarding area of analysis in the poem-'Meeting at Night'. The metrical patterning or metre in this poem shows that it is written in a very loose version of iambic tetrameter. We can take line 6 as an example-

And quench/its speed/ in the slush/ ly sand.

The first two feet (the divisions of a line of poetry) are clearly iambs, following the pattern unstressed-stressed (da DUM). However, the third foot (beginning with 'in' the) contains two unstressed syllables followed by a stressed syllable (da da DUM). This is called an anapest and nearly every single line in the poem contains at least one anapest (lines 1 and 10 are the only ones that don't). The final foot goes back to an iamb.

The poem also contains two run-on lines which are in other words called enjambment. It means that the sentence continues beyond the end of a line of verse into the next, i.e. the

end of a line, does not mark the end of a sentence. In the poem enjambment occurs in the following lines:

“And the startled little waves that leap
In fiery ringlets from their sleep”,
And
“A tap at the pane, the quick sharp scratch
And blue spurt of a lighted match.”

The poem has some useful features of poetry in the form of alliteration, consonance and assonance. Alliteration is the repetition of a consonant sound at the beginning of words that occur close together. In the poem ‘Meeting at Night’, alliteration appears in the following way:

Alliteration in line1: long, land

line 2: large, low

line 3: little, leap; the, that

line4: fiery, from

line5- pushing, prow

line6: speed, slushy, sand

line7: sea-scented

line 8: to, till; field, farm

line9: sharp, scratch

line11: less, loud

line12: than, the: two, to.

Consonance which means the repetition of a consonant (not necessarily at the beginning) in words that occur close together is also noticeable in the following way:

Consonance line1: /l/ in long, black, land
 line2: /l/ in yellow, half, large, low
 line3: /t/ in the, startled, little, that
 line5:/g/ in gain, pushing
 line6: /n/ in and, quench, sand
 line7:/m/ in mile, warm
 line8:/l/ in fields, till
 line9: /p/ in tap, pane, sharp
 line12:/t/ in than, the, two, hearts, beating.

Then there is assonance-the repetition of a vowel (or diphthong) sound in words that occur close together which is also conspicuous in the poem in the following way-

Assonance: line1: the vowel in gray, land
 line2: the diphthong in yellow, low
 The vowel in half, large
 line3: the vowel in little, leap
 line4: the vowel in ringlets, sleep
 line7: the vowel in sea, beach
 line8: the vowel in fields, till, appears
 line 9: the vowel in tap, at, pane, scratch
 line11: the diphthong in voice, joys
 line 12: the vowel in beating, each.

3.4 Syntax or analysis at the syntactic level

When we turn to the syntactic features of the poem, we notice that all the sentences in the poem are statement just like dramatic monologue. To be precise there are only two sentences-one in each stanza. These two sentences in two stanzas are joined and made long by the use of coordinating devices 'and' 'then' and 'as'. Indeed the syntactic deviance is made with the usage of 'and' at the beginning of 5 lines. This coordination gives the lines equal syntactic status and establish peaceful mood. Apparently it gives the notion that man has met the woman at night many times. Moreover, the use of several noun phrases in most of the lines is another kind of syntactic deviation in the poem. These noun phrases like 'The gray sea', 'the long black land', 'the yellow half-moon' and many others in the poem are also an instance of parallelism. The lack of finite verbals except 'appears' especially in the second stanza is also noticeable.

3.5 Lexis or analysis at the morphological level

When we turn to lexis (diction) what we notice first is the foregrounding technique employed in the use of two kinds of lexical sets. These lexical sets belong to two different register-one of sea, another one is of land. There are so many associated terms like 'waves' 'quench' beach' 'spurt' that are related to sea. Another group of words which are associated with land are 'fields' 'farm'. All these lexical sets are predominantly noun phrases with definite articles. This way they form a lexical chain and function as a cohesive set. The lexis is also predominantly mono-syllabic. Another noticeable aspect is the employment of colour words-'gray' 'black' 'yellow' and blue.

3.6 Overall structure and organization

The poem 'Meeting at Night' is written in a very loose version of iambic tetrameter. It contains two stanzas of six lines each, for a total of twelve lines which is just short of two lines more to be called a sonnet. The rhyme scheme is also neat and well contained- ABCCBA ABCCBA. In the first stanza the poet relates the sailor's sea voyage to meet his beloved. The second stanza is on the other hand a portrayal of his journey on land. However, the rhyme scheme ABCCBA tells a lot as the last three lines(CBA) reverse the sequence of the first three(ABC) and the last line rhymes with the first. Thus, while each stanza moves forward toward a goal (the beach, the lover) the rhyme scheme moves backward, signaling that the speaker can not remain with his lover indefinitely.

4. Conclusion

Stylistics unfolds the intricate relationship between language and its artistic and communicative functions. It always tries to account objectively for the meaning of a text through a systematic study of the language of a text. A true stylistician uses linguistic as well as extra-linguistic parameters to study a discourse in its proper perspective. Sounds, lexis, semantics, syntax etc are some of the tools generally used by stylisticians to interpret the communicative value of discourse. And such stylistic study of any kind of literary piece definitely assists a reader in decoding or deconstructing the inherent meaning of the text.

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